Chapter 23
Postscript:
Reflections on Black Metal "Community" in the Online Context

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a handful of suggestions for further research into online niche black metal communities, extending primarily from the perspective of media studies and medium theory. Principally, it is noted that the fragmentary, fleeting nature of the online context can provide only a partial representation of the broader complexity that characterizes the real world, international black metal community. In this sense, while online communities can provide a dynamic space for constructing subcultural meaning and identity, the online context can also provide a setting for greater fragmentation, alienation, medium fatigue, and filter "bubbles" that stifle meaningful social interaction (and hence informative analysis). Lastly, it is suggested that an understanding of the black metal community's deep relationship with its own analog-media past (which is also connected to notions of authenticity in the scene) can assist in better contextualizing current investigations into how both meaning and identity are constructed in the online, digital context.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MEDIUM

As the research in the metal studies section of this book has shown, online forums (as well as the information, experiences, and content shared within them) remain a vibrant area of academic interest. Particularly, the online extensions of various heavy metal subcultures such as black metal, offer numerous interdisciplinary paths of investigation across several fields, as these subcultures evolve within the broader web of social and technological change. In consideration of the work previously undertaken, there are several potential areas of inquiry that might be added to

the current analysis or simply be taken into consideration as caveats or qualifiers. For example, one notion to consider is how online forums might themselves *set the context* for knowledge production and consumption, above and beyond discussion threads and their content. Specifically, if knowledge is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), how then might the medium itself shape the parameters of what is possible or even desirable to 'socially produce' within niche black metal communities where highly particular identities are already constructed and maintained, prior to engaging other like-minded individuals online?

Furthermore, the methodical examination of specific user's identities, representations, or content alone might prove limiting over time, because such representations and identities can only ever be *partial* online extensions. In this sense, identities are always in flux as inherently dynamic constructs which, along with the medium itself, shift with the subcultural codes that are channeled through technology as extensions of real (and mostly anonymous) human agents. The online 'space' of any community – e.g., that constructed by underground black metal communities – is thus represented through online forums as a microcosm of what is in reality a much broader, abstract, and complex set of social constructions in real, everyday life. In this sense, the virtual space colonized by niche online communities, while reflecting and complementing what is in reality a much broader 'scene', might not be capable of properly articulating the sheer complexity and nuance of that scene when it is funneled via online mediation. While the notion of the broader 'black metal community' is indeed an identifiable subcultural group, its abstract, online extensions can only ever be partial representations of the vibrant, real-world whole. In this way, when codes of meaning are extracted and mapped through the study of online behavior, it potentially reduces the dynamism of the broader black metal scene by containing and analyzing

only its limiting, online extensions – extensions that are defined by the technological parameters and limitations of the medium itself.

At first glance, the banality of the 'user profile' and/or the constraining order of the online forum's tight interface, both affirm the precarious uniformity of the medium. As such, forums can only be mechanistic tools; they are mediators of opinion and information among like-minded individuals, distilled into homogenous online practice. Here, no matter what particular subject is under discussion, the technology is still appropriated as an extension by human agents and then further shaped by the capacities of the medium. The online forum (at least in 2013) allows for certain parameters of discussion, where substantial, affective communication can occur only within certain well-defined frameworks. Therefore, in such a context, it might be interesting to explore how the underlying drive for *authenticity* (or *trueness*) in the black metal community might also be a reaction to the very limitations and banality of the online medium itself (as well as other technological representations perceived as stemming from the dominant culture).

EMBRACING ALIENATION: A SCENE 'IN ITSELF'?

Another perspective to consider is how might asynchronous, non-concurrent communication also lend itself to greater online social fragmentation? By design, the online forum potentially reduces expression to a series of disconnected comments and ephemera, dispersed across an ever-increasing landscape of digital flotsam and jetsam. In other words, does a sort of *medium fatigue* set in, where meaningful communication reaches a point of diminishing returns, going no further within the enclosed framework of the online forum itself? Or more specifically, do forums have the capacity for allowing knowledge to expand along with the subcultures themselves as they shift and change over time?; or might

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